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STATE PASS SENATE FOR SENATOR LIEBERMAN

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TAGS: PREL PTER MARR OVIP SN

SUBJECT: SENATOR LIEBERMAN AND PM LEE DISCUSS THE REGION,
TERRORISM, AND CHINA

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia L. Herbold; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Singapore is prepared to stand up and say that the United States has a role to play in Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told Senator Joseph Lieberman on May 30. Although there are no "burning issues" on the bilateral agenda, PM Lee hopes that the next U.S. Administration will increase its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Muslim communities in the region, especially on combating terrorism. Southeast Asia is less concerned with China's military reach than with how it uses its growing economic clout, PM Lee said. The United States does not need to match China in every way in the region, but should stay similarly engaged.
End Summary.

A Comparable World View

¶2. (C) Senator Lieberman thanked Singapore for being a good friend and partner of the United States. PM Lee concurred, citing the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) as a clear symbol of the extent to which Singapore and the United States view the world in comparable ways. Our two countries enjoy a "very good" strategic partnership -- ranging from counterterrorism cooperation to collaboration in multilateral fora such as APEC. Singapore is prepared to stand up and say that the United States has a role to play in the region. PM Lee expressed his hope that the United States will not neglect its interests and friends in Asia.

Self-Radicalization a Worrying Trend

¶3. (C) PM Lee said that there are no "burning issues" in the bilateral relationship, but he hoped that the next U.S. Administration would increase its engagement with ASEAN and predominantly moderate Muslim communities in the region, particularly in combating terrorism. Senator Lieberman and PM Lee both expressed concerns about the self-radicalization of Muslims through the internet and other media. Singapore's own experience with Jemaah Islamiya (JI) terrorist organization detainees (all of them previously employed and educated members of their community) supported the conclusion that terrorism is driven more by ideology and less by socio-economic conditions, PM Lee said. Fortunately, Muslim leaders in Singapore are willing to speak out against terrorists and support for terrorism in their communities. This has not been the case in Indonesia, for example, where the government does not "officially acknowledge" JI's existence, he said.

Middle East Matters to Region's Muslims

¶ 14. (C) The United States needs to continue engaging Muslims in Southeast Asia to improve its standing, PM Lee said. He held up the U.S. relief effort in Indonesia's Aceh Province after the December 2004 Tsunami as an example of how our efforts here can generate considerable good will. However, to succeed fully, the United States must also address the difficult issues that plague the Middle East, most importantly the Israel-Palestine conflict. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States needs to be patient and seek sustainable solutions to stabilize these countries.

China

¶ 15. (C) PM Lee noted that successive U.S. Administrations have sought improved relations with China, achieving positive results. China understands that it needs constructive relations with the United States in order to stay focused on its economic development. Issues like human rights need to be addressed, but they should not define the relationship. Senator Lieberman agreed that the current Administration's China policy has yielded benefits, but growing public sentiment in the United States against free trade, especially with China, could undermine this progress. Americans are apprehensive about what China's economic rise means for them, especially in terms of jobs. PM Lee said that Singapore faced similar protectionist issues stemming from concerns among many Singaporeans that they are losing good jobs to foreign guest workers (approximately 750,000 out of a population of 4.6 million), including those from China.

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Southeast Asia Wants More Than One Friend

¶ 16. (C) Asked about China's military buildup, PM Lee said Singapore lacks inside information, but it is apparent China's modernization efforts are motivated by the Taiwan issue and a more general need as a continental-size power to enhance its defensive capabilities. He doubted that China aims to challenge the United States in other parts of the world. However, China wants to ensure it has the capability to prevent the United States from intervening on Taiwan's behalf.

¶ 17. (C) Southeast Asia is less worried about China's military reach, at least in the medium term, but keeps a close eye on what China does on the economic front, PM Lee said. The Chinese exhibit increasingly sophisticated diplomatic skills as they seek more friends and influence in the region through trade and investment. The United States does not need to match China in every way, but should stay similarly engaged. Southeast Asia wants to be friends with China but also wants more than one friend, PM Lee concluded.

¶ 18. (U) Codel Lieberman cleared this message.

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